FREE!

MMOZine

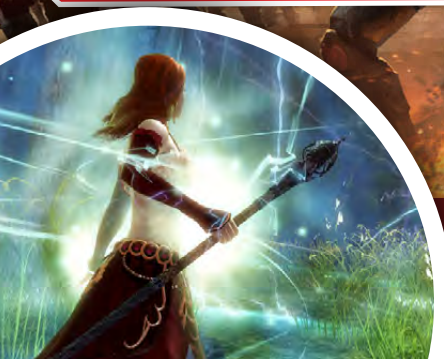
Issue 36 | February 2012

Free Magazine For MMO Gamers. Read it, Print

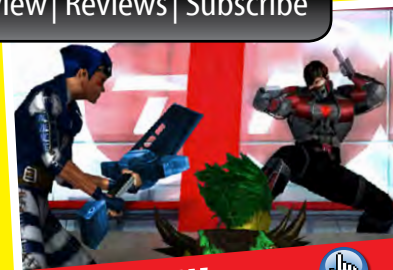
IN-DEPTH REVIEW!

STAR WARS: THE OLD REPUBLIC

THE DEFINITIVE VERDICT ON BIOWARE'S MMO



MASSIVE PREVIEW OF THE YEAR AHEAD! COULD 2012 BE THE YEAR OF THE MMO?



+ INTERVIEW

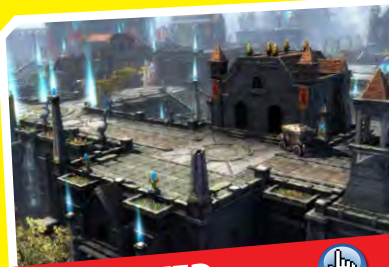
City of Heroes

Paragon talk exclusively to us!

+ PREVIEW

8Realms

Jagex try something different



+ PREVIEWED

Eligium: The Chosen One

First hands-on preview inside!

MASS
EFFECT
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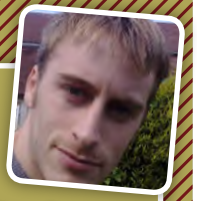
Welcome to MMOZine



2012's opening issue happens to be the first one under my stewardship, but worry not reader, as you shouldn't notice any change. We'll still cover the biggest games in the MMO genre, some of which we've summarised in our annual hottest prospects feature, and we'll do our best to ensure you know exactly which titles are worth your time with reviews that are right on the money.

We've got the definitive verdict on Star Wars: The Old Republic, after its relatively painless launch last December, and we talk with Paragon Studios about how they're beginning a new chapter in City of Heroes' development by killing off the series' most recognisable hero. Who said MMO makers are afraid of taking risks? We hope you enjoy the issue.

Andy Griffiths, Editor
mmozine@gamerzines.com

MEET THE TEAM

The MMOZine massive were told to go forth and multiplay, which they did…

DAVID SCAMMELL
Still has a selection of City of Heroes comics.

DEAN MORTLOCK
Lost his heart to a starship trooper…

DON'T MISS!

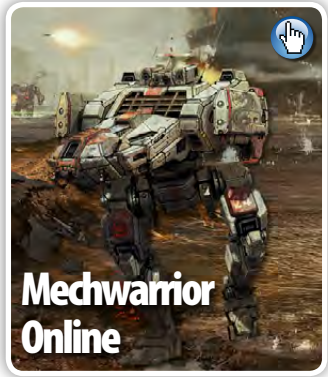
This month's highlights…

STAR WARS: THE OLD REPUBLIC

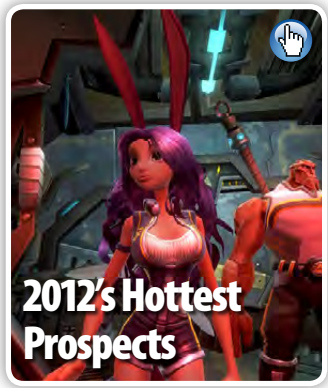
Our verdict on BioWare's first MMORPG

City of Heroes: Freedom

Paragon explain how Statesman's death marks a new era for their free-to-play MMO!



Mechwarrior Online



2012's Hottest Prospects

QUICK FINDER

Every page is just a click away

Mechwarrior Online
7UP
Eligium: The Chosen One
2012's Hottest Prospects
RODE Online
City of Heroes: Freedom
8Realms
Star Wars: The Old Republic

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STAR WARS THE OLD REPUBLIC

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16 www.pegi.info

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Mechwarrior Online

FIRST LOOK

Stomping back to steal gamers' hearts!

Publisher: Infinite Game Publishing
Developer: Smith & Tinker, Piranha Games
Heritage: N/A
Link: http://mwomercs.com
ETA: TBA

PREVIEW FEEDBACK! Click here to tell us what you think of Mechwarrior Online

Battles will be faster paced and over shorter distances than Mechwarrior fans will remember from previous games.

"Piranha Games are seeking to revive this property in all its past glory"

What's the story?

If you're over the age of 25 and owned a game-capable PC during the Nineties, the likelihood is you have a fondness for Mechwarrior. The futuristic sci-fi franchise which emulated massive mechs battling it out in giant landscapes with an array of plasma, rail gun and rocket weaponry was one of the big multiplayer hits of the past decade thanks to Microsoft putting their whole weight behind making the last entry in the series, Mechwarrior 4, immensely versatile when it came to online play – due in part to their online portal, MSN Zone. That phenomenon seems like something stuck thoroughly in the past today, but Piranha Games are seeking to revive this property in all its past glory with a new free-to-play MMO powered by CryEngine 3.

What do we know?

Mechwarrior Online will be, as the name suggests, entirely multiplayer-centric with players able to build, customise and fight inside their bipedal tanks. The simulation style of the original PC-only games will be preserved, with players fighting inside intricately detailed 3D cockpits and having to manage heat and power levels to maintain combat proficiency. There won't be a traditional persistent world to occupy, however elements of the map will be able to be fought over, either by clans or guilds encouraging a great sense of community play. It sounds a lot like the system employed in another mech-sim, Chromehounds, but with (as yet) unrevealed enhancements.

Unfortunately no player count for matches has been mentioned but there will be different classes of mech available, including Scout, Attacker, Defender and a Commander who is able to observe and orchestrate battles from a zoomed out birds-eye view to order his fellow units around effectively.

When do we get more?

As you can see from the concept art to the left, Mechwarrior Online is still fairly early on in development but the team behind the revival seem to be making great progress with new interviews appearing on their official site and regular reveals regarding the free-to-play venture.

MASS EFFECT 3

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9 MARCH 2012

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BIOWARE BETTER WITH KINECT SENSOR XBOX 360 XBOX LIVE PS3 PlayStation Network PC DVD

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RODE Online

FIRST LOOK

Let's ride!

Publisher: Mgame
Developer: In-house
Heritage: N/A
Link: http://rode.netgame.com
ETA: 2012

PREVIEW FEEDBACK! Click here to tell us what you think of RODE Online

Dragon has become such a loose term, don't you think?

What's the story?

This traditional South Korean fantasy MMORPG is heading to Europe for this first time, and even though visually it looks like the sort of experience we've seen time and time again, RODE Online has one scaly ace up its sleeve: dragons. From the earliest levels, players can select and train their own flying dragon mounts which can be used to besiege castles, take out enemies and generally look rather awesome.

What do we know?

RODE (Rise of Dragonian Era) has a fully persistent world where two competing factions have allied themselves with the two opposing dragons, named Firea and Azuria, in order to not only battle for ownership of the land, but also to put down an emerging dark dragon threat. We've yet to see anything of this fiction, which makes us think its little more than a high concept excuse to facilitate dragon-on-dragon combat high up in the heavens, but we're willing to go along for the ride.

There's also a great deal of adventuring content on the ground too, providing more traditional fantasy gameplay with quests and raids, as well as the ability to own castles spread around the map. Make no mistake, this is the sort of fully featured MMORPG you'd expect from the East, but its flight-orientated combat definitely enables it to stand out.

"Make no mistake, this is the sort of fully featured MMORPG you'd expect from the East"

Although on-foot doesn't look quite as thrilling…

Despite the aging visuals, dragons besieging castles still looks amazing.

When do we get more?

RODE was first announced for our territory last year and its publisher is looking to launch it later this year. Nifty traversal powers and novel combat are something too few new projects focus upon, yet these are the strengths of this emerging property, and best of all it's free-to-play. Fingers crossed the gameplay will hold its end of the bargain when we preview RODE later this year.

ALLODS ONLINE

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PLAYBACK OPTIONS: ENHANCED

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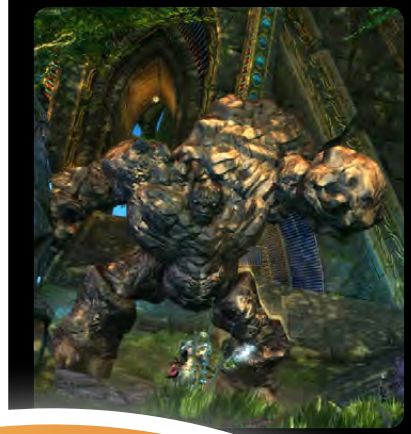
7 UP

New MMOs and content updates to mark on your calendar with a BIG RED PEN!



RIFT

Developer: Trion Worlds | **ETA:** Out Now

In a welcome move Trion Worlds has lowered the cost to subscribe to their debut MMO, Rift. Now you can snatch up an annual subscription for just under £5 per month which is considerably cheaper than the subscription-only market leader, World of Warcraft.

Project V13

Developer: Interplay | **ETA:** N/A

The Fallout MMO, codenamed 'Project V13', is now kaput thanks to Interplay surrendering their legal battle with Bethesda over license fees. Now we only saw a few screenshots of this alleged game in action, but we're still a little sad that we won't see it come into being. At time of writing Bethesda have expressed no wish to take Fallout into the MMO space.

Gods & Heroes

Developer: Heatwave Interactive | **ETA:** Out Now

Due to underwhelming subscriber numbers, Gods & Heroes has switched to a one-time purchase model with immediate effect. Players can get involved with the game at a reduced rate of $9.99 at time of writing, with plans to introduce a free-to-play model later. Hopefully this change will bring plenty more gamers to this MMO.

Star Wars: The Old Republic

Developer: BioWare Austin | **ETA:** Out Now

After only just launching BioWare has introduced a bulky piece of new end-game content to their debut MMO. 'Rise of the Rakghouls' features a new flashpoint and operation as well as other improvements.

DC Universe Online

Developer: SOE | **ETA:** Out Now

Despite boasting the master of all crafters, the one and only Batman, SOE has only just implemented an update which introduces crafting to the officially licensed DC MMO. To make it up to you they're making all activities related to crafting absolutely free. Both heroes and villains can get involved in the socket-orientated system, so there's no reason not to check it out.

ON THE RADAR

SUMMER
- Guild Wars 2

SPRING
- TERA

MARCH
- The Secret World

FEBRUARY
- The Mummy Online

Aion

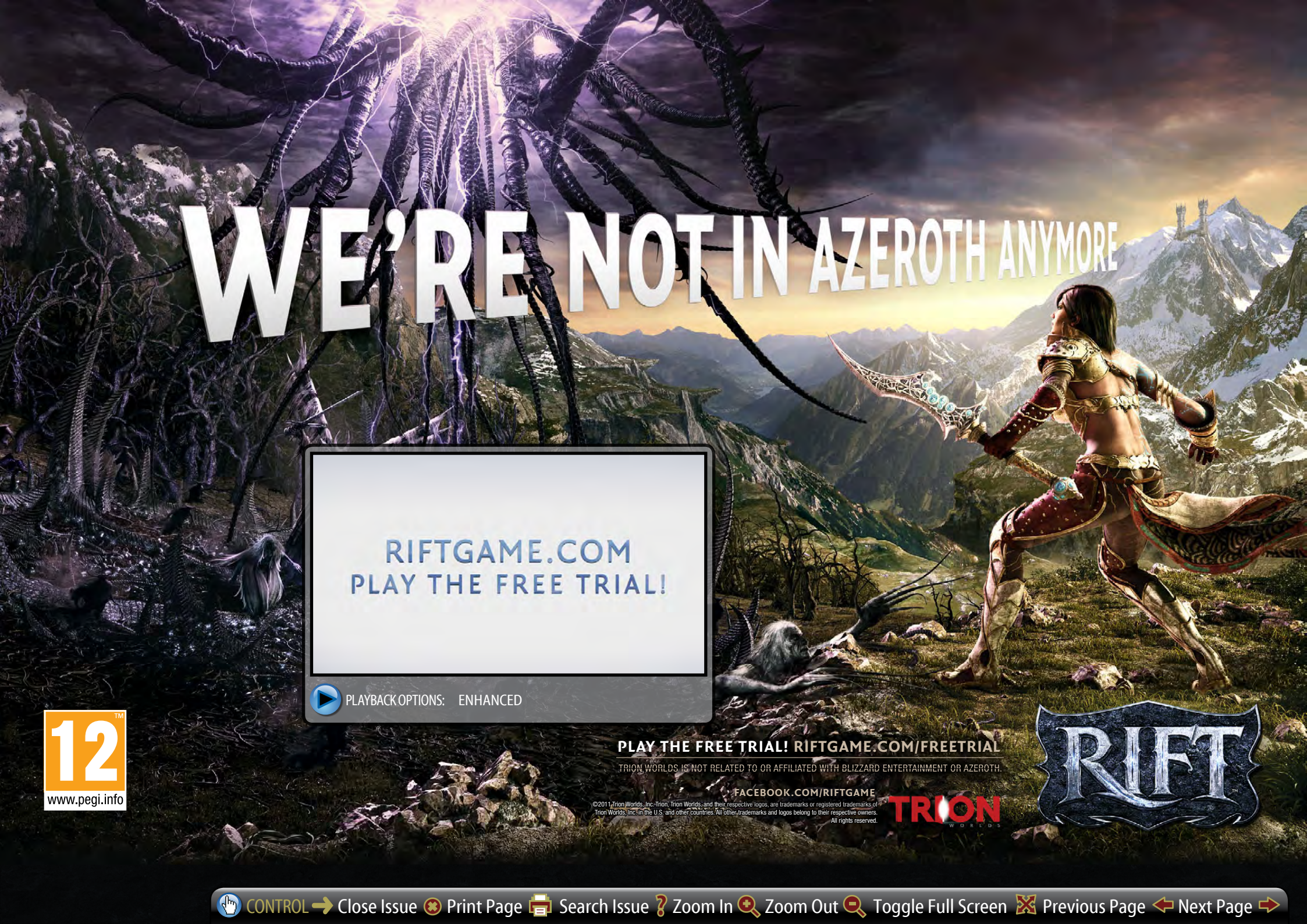
Developer: NCsoft | **ETA:** Out Now

After constant speculation, NCsoft has finally introduced a very appealing free-to-play model to boost player numbers in the fantasy MMORPG Aion, ditching monthly fees altogether. Free players will be able to enter the world of Atreia, enjoy all questing content and hit the maximum level of 55 for absolutely free but they won't be able to have more than two character slots, trade with NPC brokers or run their own store; those privileges are reserved for Veteran and Gold status members. This development is associated with GameForge, who are now running Aion in partnership with NCsoft in Europe. To find out more check out Aion's Official Magazine.

TERA

Developer: Bluehole Studio | **ETA:** Spring

Ladies and gentlemen, Frogster has opened up closed beta registration for TERA. Head to their official website to get a key, but beware they are extremely limited. Fingers crossed you'll be one of the lucky ones!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TRION WORLDS
RIFT

The Circle of Life

Paragon Studios reveal why the Statesman's demise marks a new beginning for City of Heroes

> "We've really broadened the idea of what a free game can be to a lot of people"

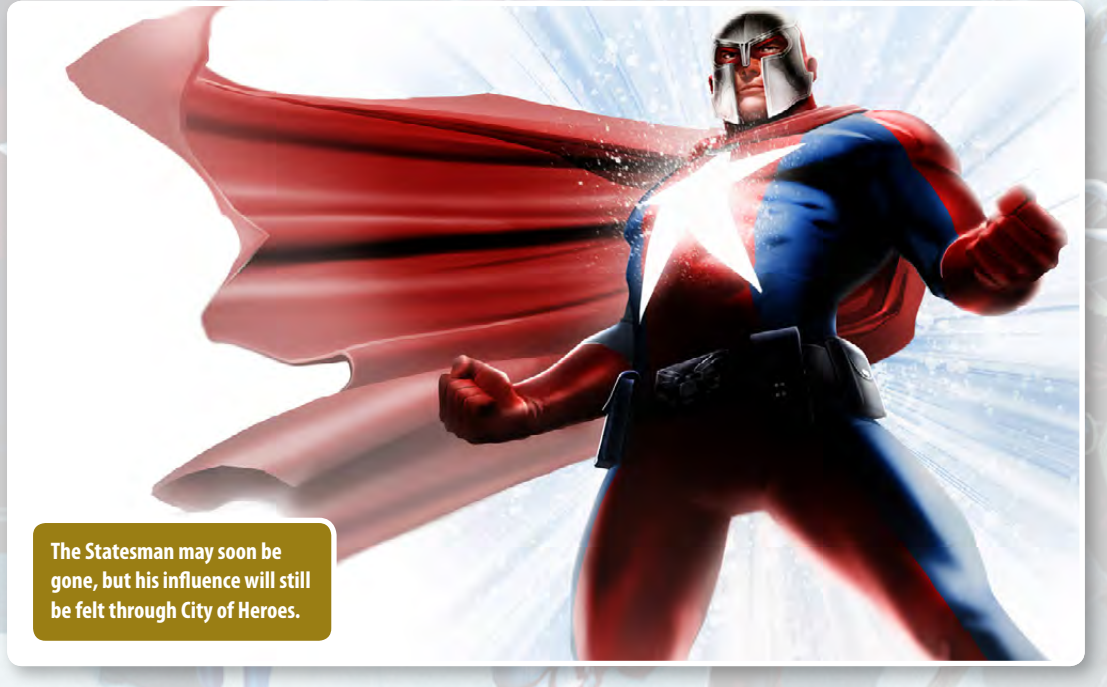
When we heard Paragon Studios were preparing the death of City of Heroes' iconic hero, The Statesman, we were shocked. Not only due to the fact that killing off any game's star is a bit of a faux pas, but also because Paragon's superhero MMO is less about following in the footsteps of others and more about forging your own heroic existence, disregarding those that went before. So in order to learn what exactly the future holds for City of Heroes, and to find out how the recent free-to-play transition went, we tracked down Lead Designer Matt Miller to ask every pertinent question we could think of…

How has the player response been to City of Heroes going free-to-play?

It has simply been an amazing time for City of Heroes. We don't publish our numbers, but suffice it to say, we were blown away with not only the incredible number of VIP subscribers we have, but also in the sheer amount of new and returning players. I think one of the reasons we're now seeing so many new players is the new Paragon Rewards program we launched with Freedom. It's allowed even non-subscribers to receive some of our best in-game rewards, just for playing the game. We've really broadened the idea of what a free game can be to a lot of people.

The grander City of Heroes fiction has always been in the background in order to give

By eliminating this MMO's most reliable hero, Paragon are allowing player characters to take centre stage.



The Statesman may soon be gone, but his influence will still be felt through City of Heroes.

Interview continued

players free reign to make their own impact in the world without feeling inferior to the 'official' heroes. Is that an issue Paragon is looking to address with the signature Story Arcs?
The signature Story Arcs are specifically designed to take your character deeper into the lore behind City of Heroes and the signature characters. We have a wealth of background information on the various enemies, groups and characters in the game, and through normal levelling players only see a fraction of it.

Signature Story Arcs allow us to expose all players to many of the characters that they may have missed, all the while giving them a chance to star in their own monthly comic book.

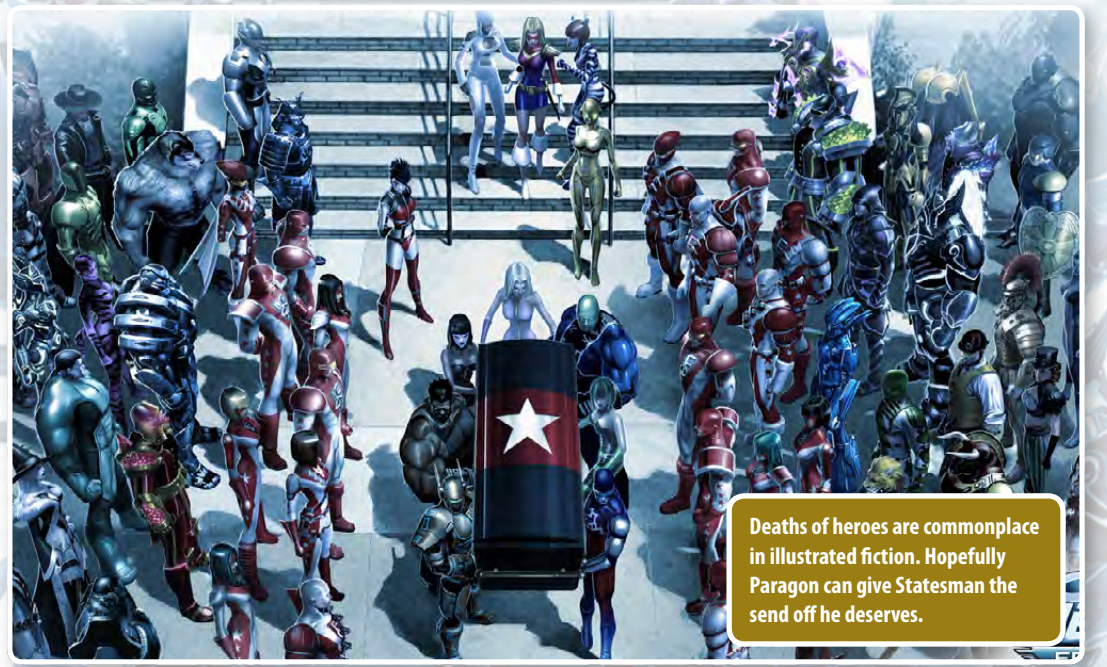
Now that Statesman has died, how will that affect the wider experience in the game?
His removal from the game world will be happening with the launch of Issue 23 later this year. We want to give everyone an opportunity to play the Signature Story Arc and understand what happened to the character before we remove him. People will still refer to him and his exploits in mission dialogs, but for the bulk of the game he will be replaced by other characters. Some places he will not be removed

> *"The Statesman's simply too iconic and defining for the City of Heroes brand for us to remove him entirely"*

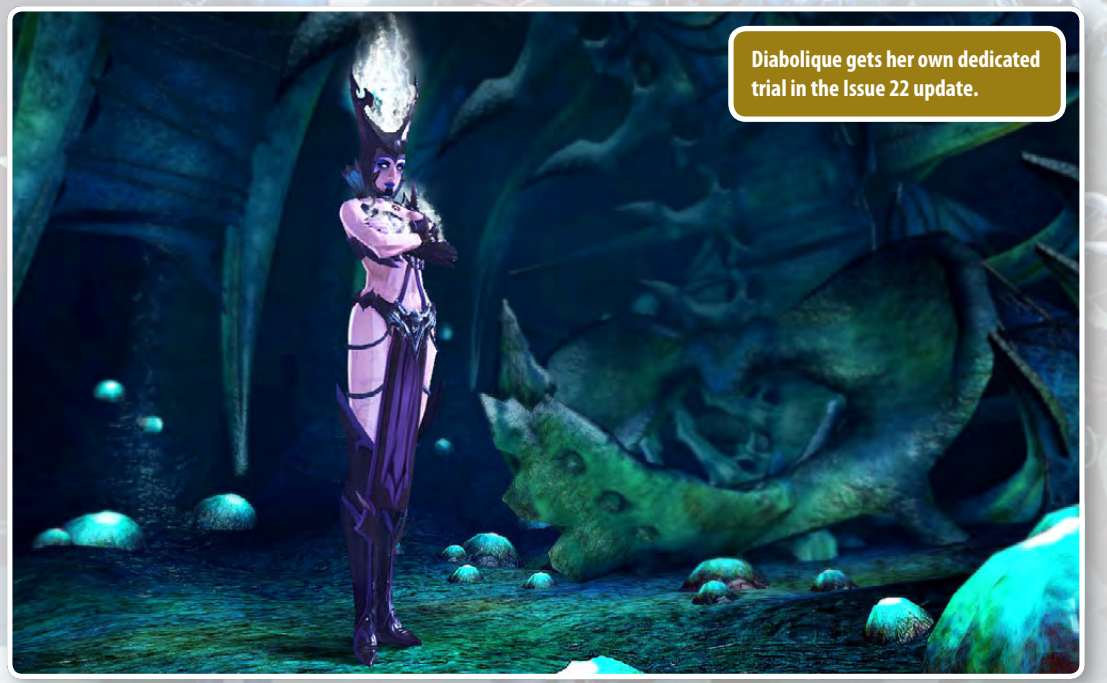
from are the tutorial (which chronologically takes place before his death) as well as the title screen and other marketing materials for the game. The Statesman's simply too iconic and defining for the City of Heroes brand for us to remove him entirely like that, even if we actually wanted to.

Are you planning on adding any updates to the store? We'd really like to be able to demo certain powers or items for a limited time in order to see how they work with our characters before purchase.
We're always looking for ways to improve the store, with specials and new stuff being offered at the forefront. A lot of players have asked for some sort of demo mode for new powersets, and that is something we are looking into for the future, but there's no timeframe on when we can get that out to players.

What sort of issue updates are being planned for the future?
We're working on multiple issues simultaneously. This has already helped us to bring our



Deaths of heroes are commonplace in illustrated fiction. Hopefully Paragon can give Statesman the send off he deserves.



Diabolique gets her own dedicated trial in the Issue 22 update.

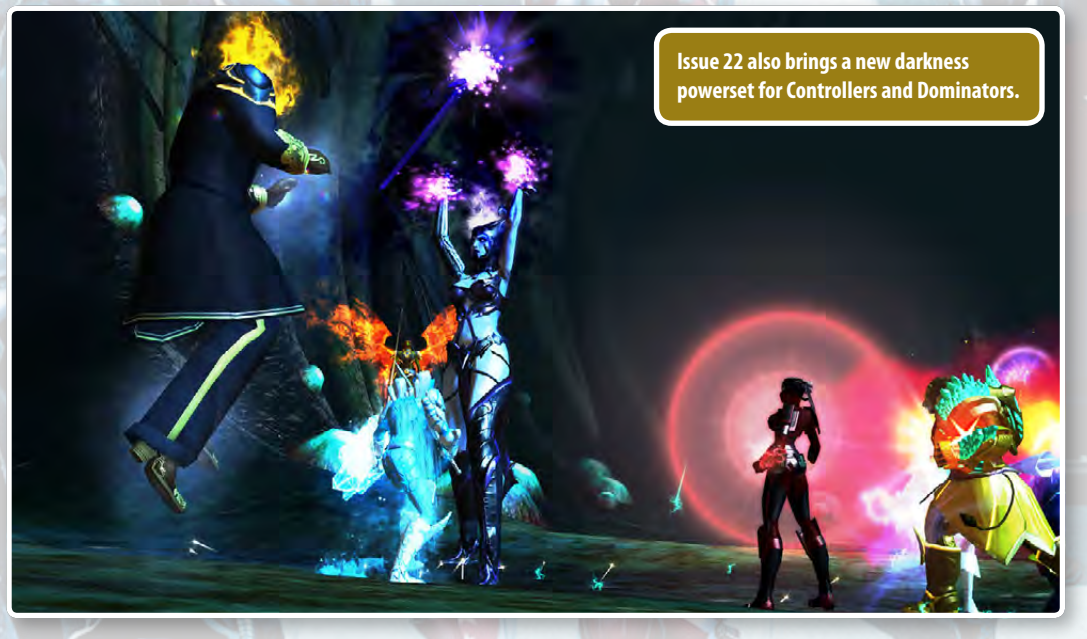
Interview continued

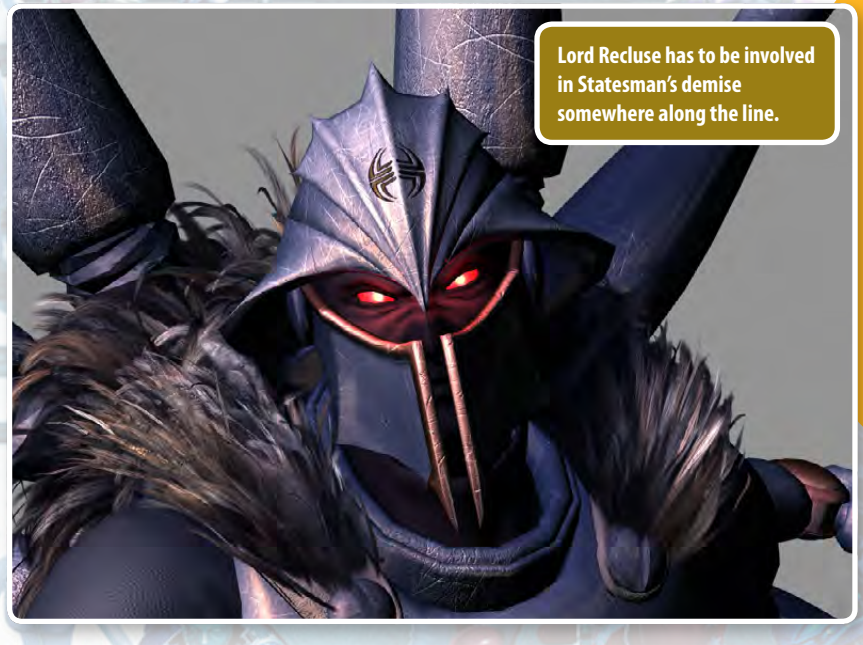
players amazing new content on a more frequent basis. This year we have three major content updates planned with Issues 22, 23 and 24, along with a new summer blockbuster event.

Are you planning to upgrade the COX engine again in the future? The Ultra Mode update must have really had a dramatic affect on the game's popularity.
Ultra mode was definitely one of our best tech upgrades. We still hear from players that they can't believe this is the same game from seven years ago. The engine may be old, but we're still just scratching the surface. Look at all of the new buildings, costumes and powers we have today. Everything we make for the game now looks so much better than what we launched with it's scary.

> *"We still hear from players that they can't believe this is the same game from seven years ago"*

We're slowly going in and doing better art for a lot of the older stuff, like how Atlas Park got a makeover for the Freedom launch, but we're also going through and making brand new areas and costumes that look simply amazing. We're focusing on continuing to make the existing content even better.


Issue 22 also brings a new darkness powerset for Controllers and Dominators.


Lord Recluse has to be involved in Statesman's demise somewhere along the line.

City of Heroes 10th anniversary is only two years away. Could you give us a clue on what you have planned?
We have some preliminary ideas sketched out, but honestly we are very focused on the next three issues and haven't planned anything solid for the anniversary of our first decade of live operations. I can tell you that we've already got some pretty cool plans for our upcoming eighth anniversary, with some new things that players have never seen before.

Why do you think City of Heroes has stood the test of time when many other MMOs have faded into obscurity?
It's because we have the best community in the entire gaming industry. Our forums are a place where people can go and get excellent advice on how to play the game as well as converse with like-minded individuals on what it's like to play a superhero or villain in our world.

We have incredibly friendly, helpful and dedicated players that make playing City of Heroes a great experience. I also think that the insane level of customisation we give you right from day one has added to our success. We are the MMO where you don't have to aspire to get the look you want, you can pretty much start with it right out of the gate, and that goes a long way in satisfying the player upfront without asking for a huge time investment.

Publisher: NCsoft
Developer: Paragon Studios
Heritage: N/A
Link: www.cityofheroes.com/freedom
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Eligium: The Chosen One

Publisher: Frogster
Developer: Shanda Games
Heritage: Wool
Link: www.eligium.com
ETA: 2012

Assuredly complex yet captivatingly competitive

PREVIEW FEEDBACK! Click here to tell us what you think of Eligium: The Chosen One

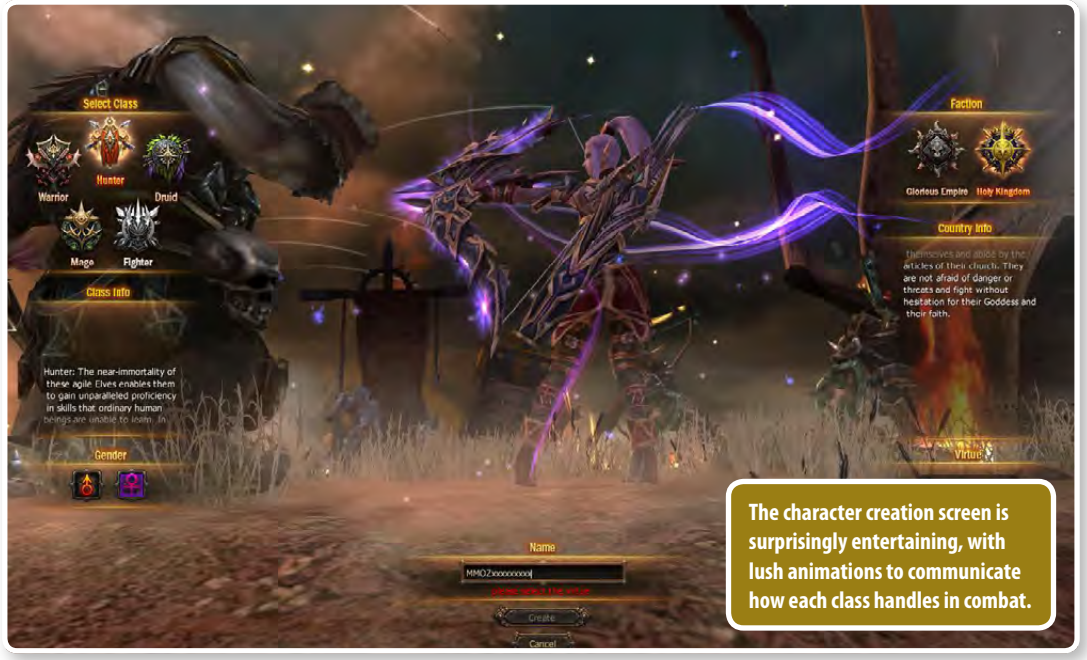
When we first saw Eligium at gamescom last year we were told it boasted 'every feature an action MMORPG fan could want' and it wasn't until we got access to a European build of the distinctly Chinese MMO that we realised what exactly that meant – namely multi-levelled menus, an advanced yet bulky UI and quests which are light on story but heavy on combat.

Eligium has none of the grace of other efforts from the East, for instance TERA's visuals or Aion's commitment to plot, but what it does have is usability and copious amounts of player choice.

For starters, players have a choice to select from five different starter classes: Warrior, Hunter, Druid, Mage and Fighter. These archetypes are as you'd expect, with the Warrior best described as a damage-dealing melee class, whereas the Mage is great at casting out spells which deal damage over wide areas. The more 'alternative' choices are the Druid and the Fighter, the first of which is a shape-shifting human and the former is a rather plump Panda, who despite his appearance, functions as a great tank. These kinds of choices are typical of the genre Eligium belongs, but they're modified by a virtue system which adds modifiers onto your class's core abilities, such as an additional healing abilities, sturdy armour buffers etc. This extra way to differentiate your creation is welcome, as aside from also choosing a faction and a gender, there isn't any way to modify any other characteristics of your adventurer, visual or otherwise, until you get into the game.

Unfortunately the nifty character select screen cannot mask the abruptness of your first impression with Eligium, as rather than witnessing a glossy cut-scene or even some slowly scrolling text, players are dropped unceremoniously into the world of Galgaron.

Combat looks very cinematic, even on the early levels.



The character creation screen is surprisingly entertaining, with lush animations to communicate how each class handles in combat.

Eligium continued

This no-frills approach to story is very indicative of our early experiences with Eligium as the majority of the quests we took part in as our kick-ass Panda Warrior were simple harvest or fetch activities with usually little justification for why we should put the work in. That said, killing the monsters around us was rarely a major effort, with creatures only attacking you once you launch the opening salvo, regardless of location, but still a little juxtaposition would be nice.

At first you only get access to some basic side-quests, but as you continue through the persistent world (linked via portals) you begin to encounter NPCs which can send you down the main questline, but even in these activities the story seems only really passable rather than compelling.

Admittedly though, that isn't what this free-to-play effort is all about. Instead PvE content seems to be a means to a PvP end, with progression gauged not only by your level, but also how much you use a skill, as you gain a proficiency rank over time with more advanced variations unlocked via the trainers. This ingenious system means players only get better at the skills that they use and their commitment is regularly rewarded with elite variations of regularly trained attacks.

This deeply nuanced skill system also applies to mounts and pets, with the ability for companions to be quickly switched out and deployed in battle –

The starter mount is a bit tame, but rest assured they got much more diverse.

HOT LINKS

In order to streamline questing, all objectives in Eligium are hot-linked, so to complete an objective all you need to do is click the underlined element in your quest-log – be it an NPC, monster or artefact – and the game will automatically take control of your character and guide them to the location in question. This may sound like the laziest way to quest in any MMO, but it means that constantly moving from one NPC to the next isn't as annoying as it would be without this system.

Thankfully most groups aren't huddled together so tightly, but even if they are, most of them are docile enough that they won't attack you unless provoked.

Eligium continued

accumulating experience and new skills as they evolve. We can imagine investing lots of hours into this system. Not only because the animal designs are assuredly cute, but also because our breed may fight entirely different to another. This competitive angle is further heightened by a slew of dynamic ranking lists which detail every single occupant of a server in accordance with their class, items, character and combat proficiency which should promote high level community play and even certain talented individuals gaining recognition for the time they've invested. To make this opportunity for online notoriety even clearer, there's even a localised ticker in the UI which details what certain players have achieved in the area.

"There's still plenty of work to do before Eligium is ready for release"

There's still plenty of work to do before Eligium is ready for release – including better localisation – but currently the character progression curve feels spot on and the tooltip-esque tutorials do a great job of introducing newbies into the game.

In sheer fiction terms Eligium can't hold a candle to its free-to-play competition, but it has enough innovative community features to ensure it has a worthwhile chance of attracting a hardcore following when it's finally unleashed later this year. Keep an eye out for the open Beta, which we suspect will go live very soon.

The interface isn't the prettiest around, but it offers plenty of functionality.

MMOZine Verdict

A rare breed of MMO which encourages players to make a name for themselves

HOW COMPLETE

60%

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

80%

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8Realms

More empire building for the masses

Publisher: Jagex Game Studios
Developer: In-house
Heritage: RuneScape
Link: www.8realms.com
ETA: Early 2012

There's a healthy amount of scepticism involved with most free-to-play browser games, especially strategy ones. Yet despite this trend and the fact there's enough competition out there to keep any gamer occupied until the end of time, Jagex has decided to enter the Ebony-a-like fray with their own empire-building sim, 8Realms. Only the difference is this one is actually quite good.

The makers of Runescape have managed to insert some humour and historical relevance into the genre with players required to guide their aimless settlement from obscurity to prosperity with the advice of comic helper, Gary. By adhering to his thoroughly British input and performing set tasks, you'll see your tribe progress through eight different eras ranging from ancient times right up to the modern day. All of the action takes place in the browser so the visuals are simplistic, but they're colourful and boast a great deal of character.

Upon creating your account, you start with a village that has a host of local resources to harvest, and from there you accumulate gold, meat, wood and other components as real-time passes. Then it's up to you to invest these components into new buildings, technology and facilities in order to grow the population, fight off occasional barbarian hordes and progress to new eras.

8Realms won't win any awards for originality, but it's an interesting character-fuelled take on a stubbornly generic genre. If you're looking for a laid-back management sim experience you should keep an eye out for its release later this year.

Getting your civilisation to this kind of advancement takes even committed players weeks.

You can choose to purchase items from the store, but there's nothing that can't be earned or unlocked over time.

MMOZine Verdict

8Realms doesn't reinvent the wheel but it has enough character to warrant its existence

HOW COMPLETE
90%

FIRST IMPRESSIONS
80%

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THE DEFINITIVE VERDICT ON BIOWARE'S MMO
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Publisher: EA, LucasArts
Developer: BioWare
Heritage: Dragon Age, Neverwinter Nights, Mass Effect
Link: www.swtor.com
OUT NOW

Star Wars: The Old Republic

"Smoothtalking smugglers, ambivalent Jedi and the always treacherous Sith"

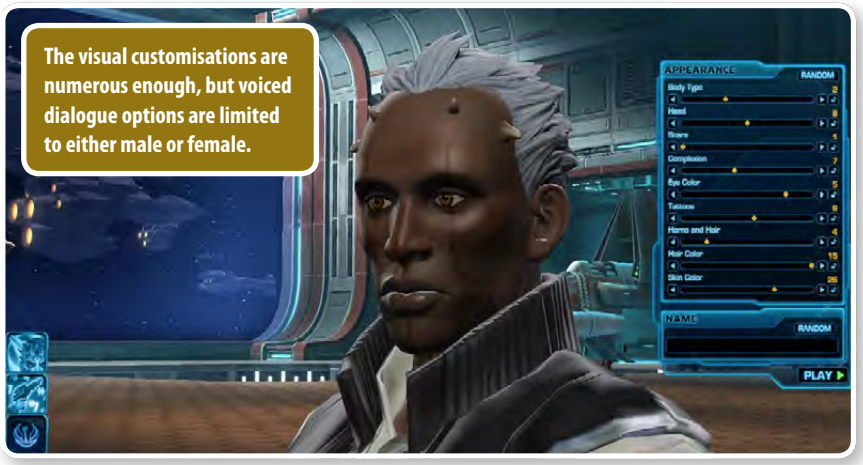
A force to be reckoned with

If there's one message that BioWare has communicated time and time again throughout The Old Republic's pre-release campaign it's that story is king. Every element of the developer's debut MMORPG is geared towards players identifying with their character in a universe which seems ripped right out of classic Star Wars lore. There's very little of George Lucas' dire Clone Wars trilogy in here, instead all the tropes – be it smooth-talking smugglers, ambivalent Jedi and the always treacherous Sith – have been ported wholesale from Knights of the Old Republic, so Star Wars fans will find it both refreshing yet comfortably familiar.

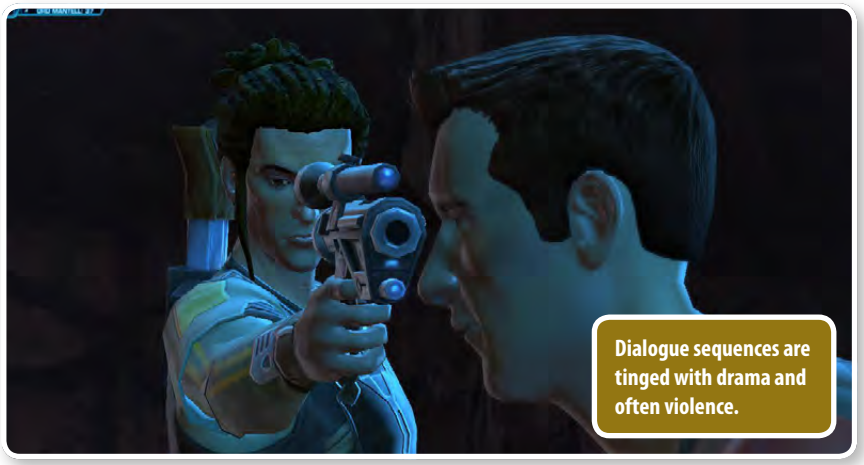
Long-time MMO players on the other hand may not find this alleged billion dollar venture to be quite so appealing, as despite boasting some of the best fiction we've ever seen in any online-only game, there's still some fundamental issues which prevent The Old Republic from being our genre's second coming.

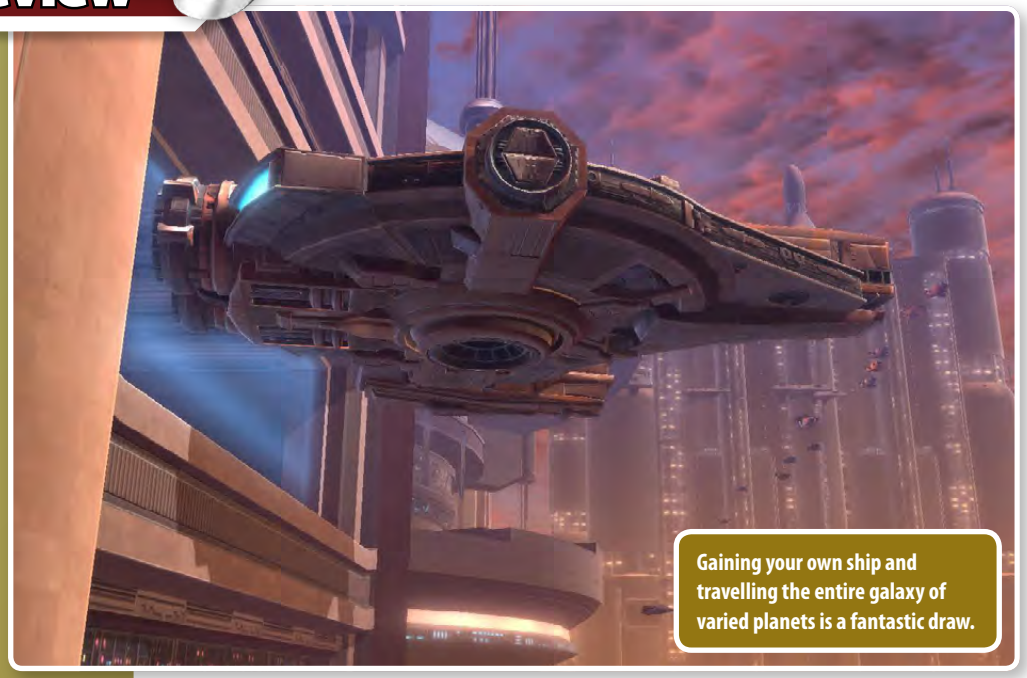
Let's begin with TOR's greatest strength, its class-specific stories. Rather than having a large over-arching questline which is delivered regardless of the combat archetype you choose, BioWare has chosen to give each skillset its own independent class story. Each of which boasts different starter planets, characters, set pieces and lore. The end result being that the dark and brooding Sith Lord storyline filled with callous murder, slavery and self-righteous Jedi has an entirely different feel to the cheeky and comedic Smuggler plot.

As you'd expect these storylines take hundreds of hours to play through and when buckled together with fully voiced dialogue, that's a lot of content for any game to offer, even an MMO. The core class quests which are spread liberally throughout the level 50 cap are consistently brilliantly designed with surprising turns, interesting objectives and sufficient pay-off at the end of each of the four acts. The problem is simply there isn't enough of them to support the experience alone, that's when the more general supplementary quests

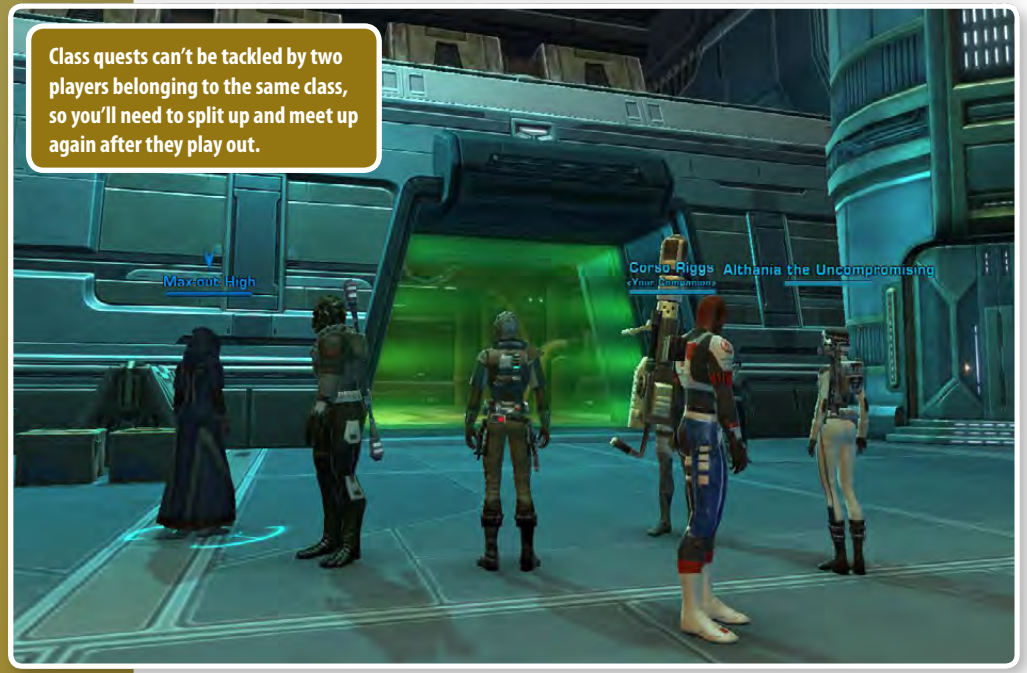


The visual customisations are numerous enough, but voiced dialogue options are limited to either male or female.


Dialogue sequences are tinged with drama and often violence.



Gaining your own ship and travelling the entire galaxy of varied planets is a fantastic draw.



Class quests can't be tackled by two players belonging to the same class, so you'll need to split up and meet up again after they play out.

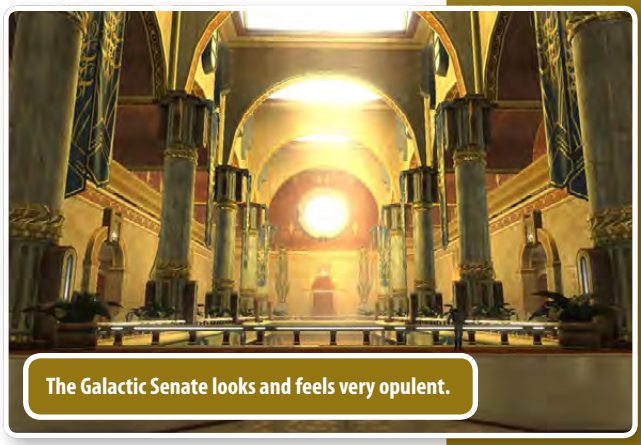
The Old Republic cont.

come in and unfortunately they aren't quite as stimulating with objectives which usually involve walking large sways of any given planet's map in order to retrieve an item before traipsing back to collect the XP reward. This was fine back in WoW's day as Blizzard could use the low-tech fantasy standpoint as an excuse for common commuting. There weren't holo-communicators to remotely communicate with NPCs, or androids to deliver goods, but in The Old Republic this technology is abundant, so there's no excuse for making players trudge back and forth repeatedly.

The Planet Suite

With the smaller early planets, like Dromund Kaas and Taris, this factor is essentially eliminated by the ability to bind to settlements, and automated speeders which ferry you to specific points via an enjoyable sightseeing tour, but when you hit the grander environments like Tatooine and Hoth those distances became inexcusably arduous, even with the addition of hover-mounts. Unfortunately BioWare are limited to toe the Star War's line, after all they can't suddenly add the ability of flight or teleportation to any given character, but they need to do something to speed up the pace of the game, as it is The Old Republic feels too slow once you pass the opening act.

Speaking of which, the first 20 levels playing as the Smuggler were brilliant. We had a clear enemy to hunt down, a double-crossing snake



The Galactic Senate looks and feels very opulent.

PLANETARY MAKE-UP

Examining how BioWare communicates the size and scale of TOR's 17 planets

STATIONS **HUBS** **HEROIC AREAS**

Each planet has its own history, atmosphere and colour palette in order to communicate you really are on a different world. However you won't see that until you exit each planet's shipping terminal.

A GALAXY OF POSSIBILITIES

Unlocking access to your ship, which happens for every class at the end of the opening act, is a fantastic addition to SW:TOR. From there you can travel to any system friendly to your faction or those that are contested. Your ship also functions like a house with areas for storage, a crafting bench and your companions which you can speak with to find out more about their backstory, gain quests or further the plot. There's also space combat missions which are little more than on-rail shooting galleries.

The Old Republic cont.

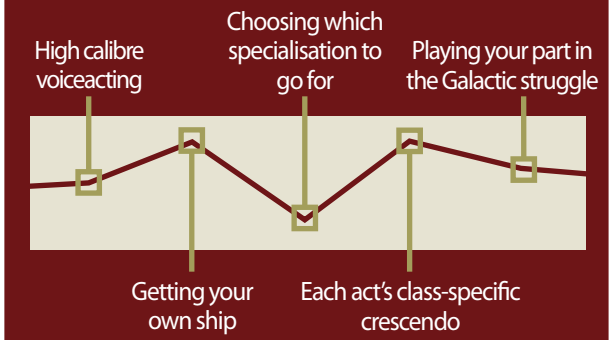
who stole our ship and dropped us in it with a particularly dangerous crime-lord, and we had to travel the length and breadth of the Galactic capital Coruscant where we came across right-wing hard-liners, corrupt senators and android worshippers. However, once you get your ship after the opening act, that tightly knit content spreads out too thinly, as you need to perform more generic quest content to pad out your character advancement, and as you do so, you begin to notice each planet's shortcomings such as the wide open spaces and the surprisingly light player load for each instance. There were times when we're sharing the entire planet of Taris with only 30 other players – for multiplayer-centric game that sort of segregation is overkill. BioWare has explained that their future event plans excuse this element of worlds feeling sparse, but it's a factor which increasingly bothered us.

Single-player MMO?

With the addition of AI companions, who can either fight by your side or perform tasks such as crafting while you're adventuring, there isn't really a need to team up with other players unless you want to tackle either the heroic areas, dedicated story-based PvE dungeons (dubbed Flashpoints) and obviously PvP. Flashpoints in particular offer up meaty slices of Empire versus Republic story content with the odd group-determined moral decision chucked in. Electing which

This mighty Twilight Dragon is one of the bosses in the Dragon Soul raid.

PULSOMETER: Signs of life


High calibre voiceacting
Choosing which specialisation to go for
Playing your part in the Galactic struggle
Getting your own ship
Each act's class-specific crescendo

The Old Republic cont.

conversation choices are uttered during these sections proved particularly memorable. Whether you talk it out in group chat or allow a random dice roll to determine who's light or dark side retort is chosen, you'll remember the story beats associated with your actions taken and in the MMO field that's something few titles can boast.

Despite a few puzzling design decisions The Old Republic has undoubtedly had a very smooth launch. The niggles associated with anti-aliasing and that memorable dancing bug are small fry in the grand scheme and there's a great basis of content here to build upon. We just wish BioWare's innovative talents were leant to more areas than just story. For instance, deviating the class archetypes further from the traditional MMO form and a space combat mechanic which is more X-Wing and less Rebel Alliance.

No release in 2011 was more highly anticipated than The Old Republic, and for the most part BioWare have met fan expectations, which is frankly very impressive. They've produced one of the most polished subscription-only MMOs to emerge in years, and as a base it's a fantastic jumping off point to build more thrilling content. It's only missing a few attributes to realise its potential as a worthy adversary to WoW, which is why we haven't pulled any punches with our criticisms.

We believe in The Old Republic, and BioWare Austin has done fantastic work, but they just need to put in a little extra effort in order to rectify a few issue to give World of Warcraft's unquestionable dominance in the MMO world a run for its money.

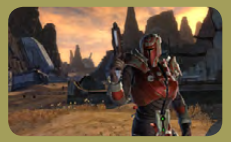
MMOZine Verdict

A fantastic base to build upon which meets almost every expectation

- ✓ Fantastic top tier story content
- ✓ Smooth launch
- ✗ Planets feel empty

CLASS OF THEIR OWN

How these archetypes handle in combat

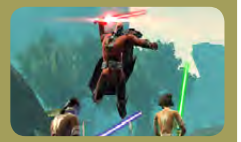


BOUNTY HUNTER
Versatile and very powerful, this class has tools for every situation.

SITH INQUISITOR
TOR's Rogue. Choose the Assassin path to gain a backstab bonus.

TROOPER
Ideally placed as tanks and can also specialise to be fantastic healers.

JEDI KNIGHT
Similar to the Sith Inquisitor, yet this class has better-looking Force abilities.



SITH WARRIOR
A fantastic controller class which can withstand a great amount of damage.

2012's Hottest Prospects

Every year the number of MMO releases gets bigger and bigger. It's a genre developers are rushing to capitalise on, so to ensure you don't get lost in the proceeding release scramble, we've put together a list detailing what titles you need to keep a keen eye on over the coming 12 months. Some have yet to be released, others could be callously described as old but we've scoured the entire Internet to find games which should attract the greatest level of interest.

So say goodbye to 2011 and its myriad of WoW clones, and say hello to a promising new era filled with untapped hope, possibilities and perhaps most excitingly, ladies with bunny ears. Here's to 2012, it's going to be one hell of a year!

10 Lord of the Rings Online

Turbine's effort from 2007 has snuck into this list simply because its central story arc has finally gotten to the good stuff, namely fighting lots and lots of Orcs with encounters with Saruman himself. In 2012 the ageing yet beautiful MMO will finally begin to emulate the key events centring around the race of men falling to the forces of Sauron. How exactly the developers plan to do this using such 'established' tech remains to be seen, but we have no doubt this is one of the big free-to-play titles to keep an eye on this year. If only to see what death and destruction awaits…

9 World of Warcraft: Mists of Panderia

What do you add to the MMO that has everything? Why Pantera of course! The hardcore metal band is exactly what the world's most profitable MMO needs in order to revitalise its appeal. What's that? The forthcoming expansion actually revolves around the fluffy Pandaren race instead and has nothing to do with air riffs? Well, you can't have it all. In truth though, we're still excited about the next and potentially last substantial content update for World of Warcraft.

Wandering around the Oriental-inspired region of Panderia and rolling a character as a kick-ass Monk should no doubt prompt millions of players to return to Blizzard's world-owning MMO, if only to sample the new content. However the biggest reason to keep track of WoW is to see how Blizzard plan to challenge the big budget rivals that have stolen substantial sways of its userbase. WoW could be a very different gaming experience come 2013.

8 Planetside 2

2003's Planetside was a game that was really ahead of its time, and when SOE announced they were bringing it back last year we were absolutely delighted. This MMOFPS will feature all the visual bells and whistles you'd expect from a modern title, including HDR lighting, real-time reflections and accurate physics, as well as the stimulating combat this franchise is known for. Additionally the world is entirely persistent, with different factions able to battle it out for ownership of certain quadrants which offer up unique unlocks in each character's dedicated and lengthy skill tree. All of this will sound very familiar to those who played the original, but we're very intrigued to see how it all works in an era when most developers and gamers can take advantage of high-speed broadband. Fingers crossed Sony stay away from the pay-to-win elements as much as possible because if they do, this could be one of the best competitive online shooters to arrive for absolutely ages.

7 Project Titan

Knowing the way that Blizzard work, there's no way that Titan will be released this year, but at the very least we should see some gameplay footage to let everyone know what the hell the gargantuan developer has been up to. What interests us the most is that the core team who originally gave birth to World of Warcraft has been working on this endeavour since at least February 2011, so surely it has to be something truly special.

Industry chatter suggests a space-themed MMO with FPS elements, so anything associated with StarCraft or Warcraft is definitely out. All signs point to this being an entirely new franchise, and from such a talented studio that's an immensely exciting proposition – albeit a frustratingly mysterious one, but hopefully 2012 will change that.

6 End of Nations

As we write this players from all around the world are already blowing each others' forces to smithereens on a giant persistent map which allows every province to be fought over, yet we can't talk about End of Nations in detail quite yet. Nevertheless we can tell you that Petroglyph Games, made up of former C&C developers, has already done a great job of attracting and cultivating a fantastic war-obsessed community. Tanks rushing enemies single-handedly or teaming up with a handful of other commanders to win a match by just a handful of points is the sort of stuff gaming legends are made of, and we can't wait to see how this MMORTS evolves over time.

Will End of Nations be the sort of game everybody falls in love with? Probably not, but if you have any sort of fondness for the old-school Command & Conquer games then this should definitely be on your radar.

TERA's bosses rarely fail to make an impression.

5 TERA

As soon as you look at TERA you see that it's something different from the norm. A stone's throw away from the fantasy genre, this archetypal MMORPG is imbued with all the imagination associated with Korean releases without the stodgy and grind-heavy combat. Instead, TERA boasts a system the developer's like to call 'True Action Combat', which is fancy talk for no automated targeting and location-specific damage. Aiming for the head and other sensitive areas actually registers extra damage on enemies, which means you stay invested in battles whereas usually you'd just monotonously click the attack button. This singular dynamic means you stay engaged, and the multitude of different enemy types means that you'll need to know their weak spots in order to incapacitate them quickly. Compared to other genres, MMO combat has never been everything that it could be, but TERA could represent the first steps in altering that perception.

Couple that revolutionary mechanic with imaginative fiction, a world begging to be explored and the ability for clans to run specific town hubs and you have an online endeavour which puts other so-called 'innovative' titles to shame. Here's hoping the EU launch goes swimmingly.

Combat is laden with dazzling special effects to try and throw you off your game.

"We're going to need a bigger gun"

4 Firefall

Yet another MMOFPS makes its way onto this list, but Firefall is about more than just competitive play. Instead this sci-fi effort boasts a world without the forced segregation of instances, and a co-operative campaign which can accommodate hundreds of players on a server at the same time. If that proposition doesn't give you goosebumps then you might as well stop playing MMOs altogether, as Firefall represents the ultimate notion of a multiplayer-centric experience – something we wish more MMO developers would remember.

The premise involves fighting back against an alien race who have emerged from some strange gloop which has rendered Earth a barren wasteland two hundred years in the future, but all that seems like watery dressing on what is otherwise a fulfilling gaming salad. As you'd expect there's plenty of PvP opportunities too, with player characters split between Assault, Recon, Medic and Engineer all sporting the sort of skills you'd expect. Now if only Red 5 would send us an invite to the Beta so we could play the damn thing!

The visuals are colourful and cel-shaded, not what you'd expect from either an MMO.

Hopefully vehicular combat will get chucked in as well.

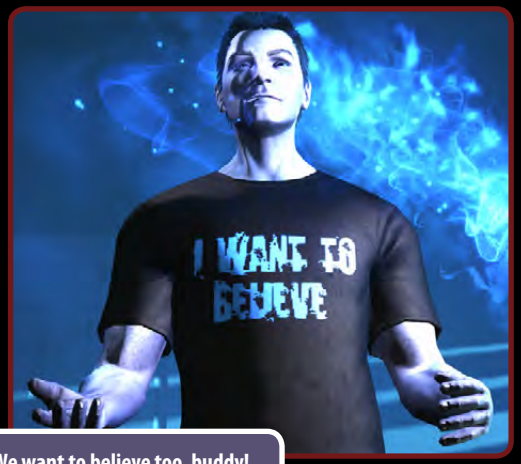
Setting your MMO during the modern day is certainly daring but with The Secret World's occult angle it works.

3 The Secret World

If the modern obsession with futuristic sci-fi or classic fantasy is getting you down, Funcom has the antidote to win you over – an MMO set in the real-world during modern times. The Secret World sees you suddenly awaken to the realities of a world steered by magic and the guiding forces of three rival societies: Dragon, Illuminati and Templars. Choosing your allegiance is just the beginning, as you bear witness to the occult breaking into subway stations, churches and other bastions of civilian life.

Funcom's recreation of London, New York and Seoul are both grungy and violent, yet they have a reverence to them which many MMO locales lack. It's this grounding in modern life which makes The Secret World so utterly engaging, with oodles of occult fiction to properly pad everything out. The combat looks a bit tame though, brought over wholesale from Age of Conan, and visually there's certainly better titles out there, but everything else looks so different from the MMO norm that we're very much looking forward to seeing how it all pans out.

Our favourite online genre isn't known for being the most innovative so it's only fitting that the studio behind Anarchy Online show the rest of the MMO-making world how exactly it's done.



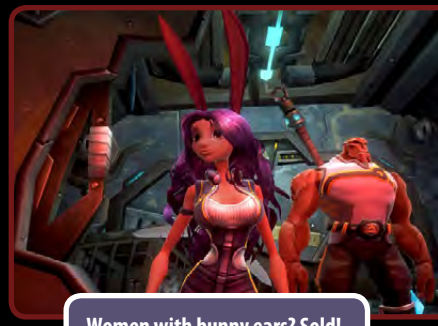
We want to believe too, buddy!

The term sci-fi MMO doesn't really put across just how different Wildstar is.

2 Wildstar

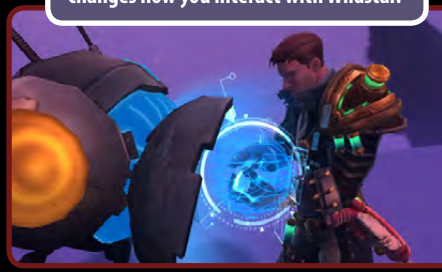
No MMO can steal the limelight from Guild Wars 2, but this title came mighty close at last year's gamescom. Sporting a unique visual style and a surprising flair for comedy, Carbine Studios debut stuck with us as we just wanted to see more of it! So many aspects just left us with more questions, like the quest momentum system which offers up more questing content without visiting a vendor, streamlining the commuting pain which plagues so many MMORPGs, and the pathing system which fundamentally shifts how players play the game.

Take the social-centric Settler, for instance. His/her ability revolves around buffing others and erecting persistent buildings in the world, such as medic-bot spewing hospitals. Now imagine you're just a regular adventurer seconds from death when suddenly an automated bot comes along and heals you, enabling you to take out the boss that you've been searching for during the past hour. That element of random player involvement and empowerment is exactly what more MMOs should offer, and if Wildstar can deliver those kind of scenarios it would certainly win a gold star from us. Now whether it arrives this year with NCsoft so heavily promoting Guild Wars 2 is a different matter entirely, but we should at least learn more about it.



Women with bunny ears? Sold!

Each of the four paths – Explorer, Soldier, Scientist or Settler – drastically changes how you interact with Wildstar.



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1 Guild Wars 2

Come on, did you really expect anything but Guild Wars 2 to top this list? ArenaNet's sequel to their genre-defining debut is making all the right noise regarding 'changing the MMO space' and bringing inter-player camaraderie back to online-only experiences, but in truth that's only part of the reason why this particular sci-fi/fantasy hybrid tops the list. The main one is that we've played GW2 already. We've sampled several hours of it both as a low-level Ranger and a high-level Engineer, and it already plays beautifully.

That faithful afternoon last year when we travelled to Berlin to just get a taster of how the sequel was shaping up provided some of the most enjoyable group questing we'd ever experienced, partly because the instance we sampled referenced the Prophecies campaign so clearly – Prince Rurik anyone? – and also because the lack of a dedicated healing class actually made the battles fought much more enjoyable.

We weren't relying on somebody to solely buff our health, instead we could be a little more self-reliant and do our own thing. Even when our inexperience got the better of us, we weren't out of the game entirely, as we entered a downed state where we could be instantly rezzed by our fellow adventurers but also help them out with some desperation-charged skills.

Match these intelligently designed combat systems with the refreshed continent of Tyria, which is just overflowing with deep fulfilling fiction involving races banding together to conquer the Elder Dragon threat, and you have what's sure to be a fantastic and illuminating experience – it's a universe crafted by ArenaNet after all.

And perhaps best of all there won't be any kind of subscription fee. Instead, players will just purchase the game for a one-time fee and from there they're free to make their impact on the world. Microtransactions will factor in somehow, but judging from how the revenue model has impacted the original Guild Wars post launch, there should still be hundreds of hours worth of content to enjoy. Guild Wars 2 still doesn't have a final release date, but the smart money says it'll appear during 2012 – as long as testing proceeds smoothly.

In MMOZine Issue 37

STAR TREK ONLINE

Boldly going where no free-to-play MMO has gone before? Check out our in-depth re-review next month!

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